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ABSTRACT

This study examined the effects of an Education for Parenthood Program (EPP) on the childrearing attitudes of eighth grade students. Two eighth grade classes were randomly selected from five sections at a middle school in south central Pennsylvania. One of the classes (both of which were approximatley 60% male and 70% black) was randomly assigned to the Experimental condition and the other to the Control condition. For nine weeks, the Controls met their regularly scheduled Health classes while the Experimentals participated in the EPP classes which emphasized increasing the students' knowledge of child development and the responsibilities of parenting. Topics were presented through group discussion, lectures, guest speakers, group exercises, role plays, and observation of children. Audio-visual aids were also used extensively. A variation of the Authoritarian Family Ideology (AFI) Scale was used as the pre- and post-test measure of childrearing attitudes. Results indicated that participation in the EPP changed the Experimentals' childrearing attitudes in the direction of greater sensitivity to the child's age appropriate behavior, increased tolerance of a child's misbehavior and sexual curiosity, and greater respect for a child's individuality. (JMB)

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# Education for Parenthood:

# Eighth Graders Change Child Rearing Attitudes

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# Education for Parenthood:

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## Abstract

Two eighth grade classes, of twenty students each, randomly selected in an urban middle school, were assigned to experimental and control conditions. Experimentals received an Education for Parenthood Program while Controls had scheduled health classes. Measured pre-post on a variation of the Authoritarian Family Ideology Scale, Experimentals evidenced greater sensitivity to the child's age appropriate behavior; increased tolerance of a child's misbehavior and sexual curiosity; and greater respect for a child's individuality. The classes were largely male (60%) and black (70%).

The myth that people are somehow innately equipped with the knowledge and capability to be good parents solely because of their biological capacity to reproduce still persists. Although experience and research show that "Raising children requires skills that are by no means universal . . . . parenthood [still] remains the greatest single perverse of the amateur" (Toffler, 1970, p. 243). Spinetta and Rigler (1972) point out that abusive parents demand that their children perform far above the children's developmental levels and show a "corresponding disregard for the infant's or child's own needs, limited ability and helplessness" (p. 299). Tracy and Clark (1974) note that in addition to being "Frequently ignorant of child development . . . . [abusive parents] control their children's behavior almost exclusively through punishment because they lack knowledge of alternative means of controlling them" (p. 399).

Such conclusions have served as a base for intervention strategies which heighten the parents' awareness of child development and explain how parents can meet their child's needs at different developmental stages. The effectiveness of these intervention strategies has encouraged researchers to advocate for parent

education programs as primary prevention programs for child abuse. It is the purpose of this study to demonstrate that an Education for Parenthood Program (EPP) can result in an attitude change about children. The EPP is developed for use with adolescents and demonstrates that following this special training adolescents grow more responsive to the needs and abilities of the child and become less preoccupied with the need for control of the child.

Parent education refers to the purposeful involvement of parents in programs designed to promote competence in guiding their child's development and to enhance their own confidence, creativity and autonomy in the parental role (Coward and Kerckhoff, 1978; Pickarts and Fargo, 1971). Coward and Kerckhoff (1978) cite the following essential components for a parent education program: (a) discussing the available alternatives for guiding children's behavior; (b) developing the skills necessary to communicate with children; (c) exploring effects children have on the parental relationship; (d) identifying personal value systems and recognizing their impact on the parent/child relationship; (e) appreciating the commitment necessary to be a parent; and (f) experiencing supervised interaction with young children (p. 25).

Of special significance are parent education programs specifically geared to the special needs of the adolescent parent (Levenson, Hale, Hollier, and Tirado, 1978; MacLachlan and Cole, 1978). This is a critical target group when one considers the dramatic increase in teenage pregnancy (Coalition for Children and Youth, 1978; Stickle and Ma, 1975). Two notable examples designed for youth are the Exploring Childhood curricula developed by the Education Development Center at Newton, Massachusetts, and the Facilitative Environments Encouraging Development (FEED) Program (Anastasiow 1977).

Such programs for adolescents have rarely been an integral part of a regular school curriculum and are taught as part of a course in the few instances where they are available (Coward and Kerckhoff, 1978; Kerckhoff and Habig, 1976). Participants have frequently been volunteers (Stevens, 1978). This suggests that

adolescents and adolescent parents are being reached, if at all, on a haphazard, reactive basis rather than on a preventative, systematic basis.

Using the school as the setting for parenting programs has several advantages. First, the chances of reaching a large percentage of the "potential parent" population is enhanced. Helfer (1976) points out that: "Although parents who are likely to have problems in bringing up their children can be found literally everywhere . . . . There are three times in the life of parents or future parents when they are readily accessible . . . . during the future parents' school years . . . . all children should be taught [parenting] skills, not just a few" (pp. 367-368). By incorporating parent education programs into the school curriculum, males will have an increased likelihood of instruction in child development and care. Helfer advocates that the school system be "convinced, pressured or even coerced to initiate parenting and early child development courses and skill learning experiences for every elementary, junior and senior high school student" (p. 370).

## The Study

Two eighth grade classes were randomly selected from five sections at a middle school in southcentral Pennsylvania. One of the classes was randomly assigned as the Experimentals. Each class consisted of 30 student participants who shared the demographic characteristics of being 60% male, 70% black and 97% between the ages of 13 and 14 years. Due to high absenteeism, defined as missing more than 50% of the classes and not participating in either pre or post testing, ten students from each group did not complete the program.

On the first day of the program a variation of Ernhart and Loevinger's Authoritarian Family Ideology (AFI) Scale,(1969) also known as Raising Children, was given. Within the same week at the same time of the day the AFI Scale was given to the Controls.

For the next nine weeks Controls met their regularly scheduled Health classes. Three times a week the Experimentals participated in the EPP classes which emphasized increasing the students' knowledge of child development and the responsibilities of parenting. Topics were presented through group discussions, lectures, guest speakers, group exercises, role plays and observation of children. Audio-visual aids were used extensively.

Topics included the following (with number of class sessions in parentheses):

1. Introduction to EPP (1) Parents as Teachers
2. Life before Birth, I (2) The Child, the Mother, the Father
3. Teenage Pregnancy (1) Who in the class would be choosen to be a father (mother)?
4. Life before Birth, II (2) Nutrition, Drugs, Smoking
5. A Children's Care Center (1) Developmentally Disabled
6. Infant Development, I (2) Observing an Infant
7. Infant Development, II (6) Infant Needs, Parental Responses
8. Children with Special Needs (6) Handicapped and Their Parents
9. Toddlerhood (2) Active Children, Accidents
10. First Adolescence: Two (2) The Terrible Twos
11. The Preschooler (1) Sex Education
12. Field Trip to a Care Center (1) Interactions with Children

The AFI Scale was administered on the last regular class day (Session 26) to both Experimentals and Controls.

## Results

On the AFI Scale there were no significant differences between means of the two groups on the pretest. There was an effect of treatment in the difference in the experimental group, $\underline{t}$ (19) = 16.61, $p \leq .01$, but no effect in the control group. Further, the control group's posttest score was more authoritarian than the experimental group's posttest score, $p \leq .01$.

To determine precisely what items on the AFI Scale were reflecting a change, an item analysis was performed. The Experimental Pre-post responses and the Experimental post vs. Control Post responses were compared, using chi square tests.

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Insert Table 1 Here

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Specifically, program participants agreed after the program that (a) babies cannot be spoiled if picked up when they cry; (b) a parent should encourage the child to express angry feelings even toward the parent; (c) small babies should be fed when they are hungry rather than according to a fixed schedule; (d) it is best to "make up" to a child right after punishment; and (e) it is all right for small children to watch their parents get dressed and undressed. The Experimentals also moved toward agreeing that (a) children should be able to eat what they like and (b) it is normal for a two year old to say "No!" to parents' requests.

## Summary

Eighth grade students in a Parent Education Program modified their authoritarian child-rearing attitudes. The students were in an urban middle school which services a high percentage of blacks and children at the poverty level.

Results of this study, like those of Exploring Childhood and FEED, indicate that adolescence is an appropriate time for teaching parenting skills. All three studies report success in positively modifying students' feelings toward children. Claims to long-term behavior changes must be substantiated by further investigations. Controlled follow-up studies of some program participants should answer such questionsas the age they became parents, whether pregnancies were planned, and finally, whether parent education programs serve as primary prevention programs of child abuse.

Table I

Chi Square Table of Test Items Showing

the Number of Authoritarian versus Non-Authoritarian Responses

Expressed by Experimental and Control Groups on the Pretest and the Posttest

| Items | Groups | Number of Responses | | Partitioned $\chi^2$ results | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | Authoritarian | Non-Authoritarian | $E_1 - E_2$ [a] | $E_2 - C_2$ [b] |
| 1. A. You can spoil a baby by picking him up every time he cries. (Authoritarian) | Experimental (Pretest) | 20 | 0 | $p \leqslant .001$ | $p \leqslant .001$ |
| B. You cannot spoil a baby by picking him up every time he cries. | Experimental (Posttest) | 6 | 14 | | |
| | Control (Posttest) | 19 | 19 | | |
| | Control (Pretest) | 19 | 19 | | |

[a] $E_1 - E_2$ = Experimental group's pretest total versus its posttest total

[b] $E_2 - C_2$ = Experimental group's posttest total versus the control group's posttest total

Table I (cont.)

| Items | Groups | Number of Responses: Authoritarian | Number of Responses: Non-Authoritarian | Partitioned $\chi^2$ results: $E_1 - E_2$ [a] | Partitioned $\chi^2$ results: $E_2 - C_2$ [b] |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 8. A. A parent should teach his child that anger should not be expressed toward the parent. (Authoritarian) B. A parent should encourage his child to express his angry feelings even toward the parent. | Experimental (Pretest) | 14 | 6 | $p \leqslant .20$ | $p \leqslant .02$ |
| | Experimental (Posttest) | 10 | 10 | | |
| | Control (Posttest) | 17 | 3 | | |
| | Control (Pretest) | 15 | 5 | | |
| 9. A. Small babies should be fed when they are hungry. B. Small babies should be fed on a regular schedule. (Authoritarian) | Experimental (Pretest) | 15 | 5 | $p \leqslant .01$ | $p \leqslant .05$ |
| | Experimental (Posttest) | 9 | 11 | | |
| | Control (Posttest) | 16 | 4 | | |
| | Control (Pretest) | 16 | 4 | | |

Table I (cont.)

| Items | Groups | Number of Responses: Authoritarian | Non-Authoritarian | Partitioned $\chi^2$ results: $E_1 - E_2$ [a] | $E_2 - C_2$ [b] |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 18. A. Parents should prepare good meals and let children eat what they like. B. Parents should teach children to eat everything on their plates. (Authoritarian) | Experimental (Pretest) | 17 | 3 | $p \leqslant .10$ | $p \leqslant .10$ |
| | Experimental (Posttest) | 12 | 8 | | |
| | Control (Posttest) | 17 | 3 | | |
| | Control (Pretest) | 17 | 3 | | |
| 29. A. Punishing a child doesn't do any good if you make up to her right away. (Authoritarian) B. It is best to make up with a child right after punishing her. | Experimental (Pretest) | 17 | 3 | $p \leqslant .01$ | $p \leqslant .01$ |
| | Experimental (Posttest) | 9 | 11 | | |
| | Control (Posttest) | 17 | 3 | | |
| | Control (Pretest) | 19 | 1 | | |

Table I (cont.)

| Items | Groups | Number of Responses: Authoritarian | Number of Responses: Non-Authoritarian | Partitioned $\chi^2$ results: $E_1 - E_2$ [a] | Partitioned $\chi^2$ results: $E_2 - C_2$ [b] |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 35. A. It is best for small children not to watch their parents get dressed and undressed. (Authoritarian) B. It is all right for small children to watch their parents get dressed and undressed. | Experimental (Pretest) | 17 | 3 | $p \leqslant .01$ | $p \leqslant .10$ |
| | Experimental (Posttest) | 8 | 12 | | |
| | Control (Posttest) | 14 | 6 | | |
| | Control (Pretest) | 19 | 1 | | |
| 45. A. It's perfectly normal for a two-year-old to say "No! No!" to his parents' requests. B. A two-year-old should be scolded for saying "No! No!" to his parents' requests. (Authoritarian) | Experimental (Pretest) | 11 | 9 | $p \leqslant .20$ | $p \leqslant .20$ |
| | Experimental (Posttest) | 6 | 14 | | |
| | Control (Posttest) | 10 | 10 | | |
| | Control (Pretest) | 12 | 8 | | |

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